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Peripheral Realism Revisited

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329201600102>

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 59(1): e002, 2016

Abstract

In this article we summarize the precepts of Peripheral Realism, its place in the intellectual history of International Relations Theory, its contributions to interpreting Latin American international politics and its insights for the future. After revising the intellectual merits and tenets of the theory in the four initial sections, we show how it predicted the behavior of Latin American states under unipolarity. Finally, we review its implications for a world where China may hold economic primacy.

Keywords: Peripheral Realism, United States-Latin America relations, Foreign Policy in Latin America.

Received: July 28, 2015

Accepted: February 17, 2016

Introduction

There have been several Latin American contributions to the understanding of international politics, both in the realm of International Law (Holsti 1996; Hurrell 1998; Kacowicz 2005) and of International Relations (IR) Theory. The latter is illustrated by the many works of economists and political scientists that thought of international politics from the perspective of the ECLA-Prebisch center-periphery paradigm (Briceño Ruiz 2012); from the viewpoint of dependency theory (Cardoso and Faletto 1969), and from the outlook of “autonomy” as a central foreign policy goal for Latin American states (Puig 1980; Jaguaribe 1985; Russell and Tokatlian 2010). Notwithstanding these illustrious predecessors, during the past three decades Peripheral Realism (hereafter RP, as in the Spanish original *Realismo Periférico*) has probably been the most influential IR theory developed in Latin America; one that intends to contribute to a more general realist theory of international relations and has still much to say about the current implications of world politics for peripheral states.

The idea that “...beginning in the 1990s, academic production in the region on the topic of autonomy was nonexistent” and

that “Carlos Escudé’s (1995) formulation of peripheral realism constitutes the only exhaustive conceptual endeavor in recent Latin American IR” (Tickner 2003, 332), is one of great acceptance among IR scholars in the region and abroad. Although a debate on the idea of “autonomy” did exist and the concept was widely used in academic and political discourse to refer to midway strategies between balancing and bandwagoning the US, no systematic explanatory theory was developed to elucidate under which conditions autonomy was possible, preferable or more prone to be pursued. RP did exactly this, reaching the conclusion that weaker states, such as Argentina, could not seek high degrees of autonomy *vis-à-vis* the superpower hegemonic in their region without damaging the well-being of their citizenries.

In recent times, RP has regained much attention, not only in Latin America (Santoro 2008; Devés Valdés 2004) but also beyond, in countries like India (Sahni 2001) and China (Sun 2003; Xu 2010), whose intellectual elites are exploring the possibility of building peripheral theories more focused on how to solve the foreign policy dilemmas that their countries confront. In this sense, RP has contributed substantially to an important, ongoing debate about non-Western IR theories (Acharya and Buzan 2009).

Moreover, Anglo-American scholars have recently acknowledged that RP “makes realism more realistic” (Close 2009, 236) and offers “hints about when and where the strong wage war on the weak” (Lemke 2002, 203-204). The fact that major U.S. handbooks for the teaching of Latin American IR and Security are enhancing the presence of RP in U.S. classrooms (Escudé 2015a and 2015b) also demonstrates the recognition that the theory has attained among mainstream scholars.

Anticipating the realist debate: RP’s three main criticisms of Neorealism

The most remarkable twist that RP introduces to the realist debate is based on three critiques that would be later explored and developed by many other realists during the 1990s and 2000s. These critiques are leveled at: a) the concept of the state as unit of analysis, b) the preeminence of security in the definition of the national interest and c) the concept of anarchy as the ordering principle of the international system.

First, Escudé analyzes the concept of ‘state’, which is ambiguous in most IR literature and is often confused with other terms such as ‘nation’, ‘country’ or ‘government’. In the case of state-centric theories such as Neorealism, these ambiguities become much more problematic (cf. Ashley 1984). Therefore, an essential contribution of RP was to make it clear that international politics takes place among *countries* that encompass both a society – or people – and a set of institutions for their political organization – or state. It follows that each country has a certain state-society configuration dependent on its political regime, its social structure, its political culture, and so forth. Conditioned by these intervening variables, foreign policy can alternatively

serve the best interests of the citizenry, of a certain elite or of a single statesman. In this sense, RP was a pioneer of Neoclassical Realism (Rose 1998, Lobell et al. 2009), a strand of realism that, beginning in the mid 1990s, started to open the ‘black box’ of the state to highlight relevant domestic differences among countries and criticize purely systemic interpretations of world politics – such as Neorealism’s (Waltz 1979) – by introducing intervening domestic variables in their analyses.

The second critique that Escudé develops convincingly is that security is not always central to the definition of the national interest (cf. Keohane and Nye 1977) and that, since politics is not independent from economics (Morgenthau 1948), the national interest can often be defined in terms of economic development and citizen welfare, in contexts where a greater power provides for security and state survival. Moreover, Escudé proposed these new conceptions without leaving the realist frame of analysis. For the realist community, the idea that the national interest could be defined in terms of economic development rather than security or ‘survival’ seemed dismissable in the early 1990s (cf. Grieco 1993; Mearsheimer 1994; Legro and Moravksic 1999). In this sense, RP was a sort of precursor of Postclassical Realism, a branch of realism that many years later brought the possibility of deemphasizing security to the benefit of economics in unipolar contexts (Brooks 1997; Taliaferro 2001).

The third critique that RP leveled at the realist body of literature at the beginning of the 1990s was directed to the concept of anarchy. For Escudé, even if the international hierarchy is obviously more precarious when compared with its domestic analogy, the international system cannot be defined as anarchic because of the great power differentials among states. These conceptions resulted in an implicit dialogue with the Hegemonic Stability Theory (Gilpin 1981) and other strands of realism (Organisky and Kugler 1980; Lemke 2002) that very few – if any – neorealist had attempted by the early 1990s, but would be introduced to the debate later on by important structural realists (Mearsheimer 2001; Lake 2009; Wohlforth 2011). However, while those authors praise hierarchy as a source of stability, RP limits itself to acknowledging it as a fact of life.

Summarizing, a theory inspired in the peripheral experience of Latin American countries started by putting into question some tenets of Neorealism that only later would be criticized and revised by important schools such as Neoclassical Realism, Postclassical Realism and Offensive Realism. Yet in his quest to develop a new IR theory Escudé had to surpass the deconstructive critique by offering also a new explanation for the behavior and fate of peripheral states.

Respecting all major assumptions of neorealism except the corrections highlighted before – which implied taking into account the differences between political regimes; acknowledging economic development as the foremost national interest; and accepting the hierarchic nature of certain dyadic relations –, Escudé asserted that elite-centered or statesman-centered regimes could lead to foreign policies that are at odds with economic development and the well-being of the citizenry. These regimes allow elites to impose on the common citizen the elevated costs

of overlooking the constraints derived from power distribution in the international system. It is what happens when those at the top isolate decision making from the citizenry, or use nationalistic arguments to convince public opinion that it is appropriate to extract more resources for costly and audacious international endeavors. Indeed, no matter how alluring a nationalistic discourse may be, the fact remains that in a country with limited resources, a grand foreign policy will always be at the expense of its citizens.

The same applies to great powers, though in their case the principle is less visible due to their relative abundance of economic resources. But because resources are never infinite, and because extreme foreign policy autonomy also compromises human resources, unlimited autonomy necessarily leads to dictatorship and poverty even in the case of a superpower. This dilemma is summarized by Escudé in a compelling formula:

Total foreign policy autonomy = Absolute domestic tyranny

As an explanatory theory, RP has two more elements that precluded IR realist debates to follow. First was the idea that certain states may be more capable of mobilizing internal resources for the prosecution of international security goals – i.e. that the extractive capacity of the state varies from country to country – which was later developed by Neoclassical Realists (Zakaria 1998; Taliaferro 2006). Second, it was implicit in RP that democratic regimes would tend to be less belligerent and more respectful of the *statu quo*, an embryonic idea that was gaining increasing acceptance and attention by the time RP was developed, and is now broadly known as the ‘democratic peace theory’ (Russett 1993; cf. Rosato 2003). Later developments in IR Theory would prove again that in many ways this Latin American theory, while debating the concept of autonomy – one rooted in previous regional literature – was also at the *avant-garde* of the realist debate taking place at the very core of the international system, or what we may call ‘central realism’.

By introducing domestic considerations, deemphasizing security and grasping the hierarchical nature of certain bilateral relations, Escudé developed a realist theory that had a powerful impact in the IR scholarly debate, both at the core and at the periphery of the world system.¹ As we will see, this theory remains a powerful and stylized analytical tool for IR scholars today. However, we still have one theoretical merit to highlight. The following section shows how RP also anticipated the conclusion of most realists on the behavior of second tier regional states under unipolarity.

¹ Almost immediately after its publication in 1992, *Realismo periférico* was reviewed positively, among others, by two of the world’s most relevant IR journals: *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 71, N° 5, Winter 1992-93) and the *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* (Vol. 36:1, 1993). The final sentence of Abraham F. Lowenthal’s *Foreign Affairs* review says: “An important book.” In turn, RBPI’s review, authored by Prof. Aragão e Frota, states that “*Os pontos defendidos no seu livro são polêmicos. Próprios de quem aos poucos faz escola.*”

RP foreign policy: predicting incentive structures under unipolarity

Among the most interesting features of RP is that it preceded, by many years, the most influential realist interpretations of how incentives for balancing and bandwagoning were allocated among minor states under the hegemony of a major power. Departing from his own historiographical work based on declassified secret records from the U.S. and British archives, which documented covert sanctions against Argentina for its neutrality during World War II, Escudé (1981, 1983, 1992) came to the conclusion that ever since 1942, and most especially since the end of the Cold War, the incentives for Latin American countries have been to bandwagon with the US, a conclusion which most realists studying the logic of unipolar structures arrived at several years later.

The stability of the unipolar order puzzled most realists after the Cold War. It was then unclear what would be the logic of power distribution until the inevitable emergence of a new bi- or multi-polar structure (Wohlforth 1999). Which countries faced incentives to form a coalition against the US, if any? Which would try to balance? Which would bandwagon? And why? Two main arguments were put forward at the initial phases of unipolarity: that the preeminence of the US would generate incentives to balance its power and restore a multipolar order (Waltz 1993), and that the immense power superiority of the US would induce bandwagoning behaviors and potentiate American leadership instead (Krauthammer 1990). However, these assumptions were too general and not very informative for policymakers from Latin American countries.

When this debate was at its very beginnings, RP made an educated guess. The theory differentiated between great powers and weaker peripheral countries, and followed the logic of Hegemonic Stability to predict that confronting the only pole of a unipolar system would be simply too costly for any of the weaker peripheral states. It did not say much about the reaction of important core countries that were not the US itself, like Germany or Japan. It did not say much either about great peripheral countries such as China or India. However, when referring to weaker peripheral states, Escudé's theory was very precise in expecting more contestation from autocratic regimes ready to pay the costs of defying the American primacy – such as Afghanistan, Iraq or Serbia – and less contestation from democratic regimes whose citizens were less keen to sacrifice domestic well-being to get international prestige. In sum, RP predicted that incentives for secondary regional powers such as Argentina – which could not even dream of being a pole in any emerging multipolarity – were to bandwagon with the US.

Many years after, the 'central realist' debate would come to very similar conclusions. A decade of unipolarity allowed realist IR scholars to develop a more nuanced description of how incentives under unipolarity were distributed. They defined a four-scaled structure composed by a single superpower who holds primacy at the top – the US –, certain regional powers that might intend to gain autonomy and even (soft) balance to achieve a bi- or multi-polar structure – e.g. China, Russia, Germany, Brazil, etc. –, a set of second-tier regional powers that would not be able to catch up with the US or be a pole in a multipolar order, but might

feel threatened by the rise of their regional competitors – e.g. Argentina, Great Britain, Japan, etc. – and only then, the weakest states at the end of the scale. The logic of the argument is somehow more complex than the one developed by RP, but the conclusions are more or less the same. One author puts it like this:

... the principal source of contention between the superpower and the major regional powers [e.g. Brazil] is the former's intervention to limit, counter, or shape the actions of the latter. For the secondary regional powers [e.g. Argentina], on the other hand, superpower intervention is a resource that they potentially can mobilize against their region's major power. The superpower and the secondary regional powers will thus often, although not always, share converging interests against major regional powers, and secondary regional powers will have little incentive to join in a coalition against the superpower. (Huntington, 1999, 42)

Another well-known realist puts it slightly differently:

... in each region there are smaller “pivotal states” [e.g. Argentina] that make natural U.S. allies against an aspiring regional power. Indeed, the United States' first move in any counterbalancing game of this sort could be to try to promote such pivotal states to great power status ... regional balancing dynamics are likely to kick in against the local great power much more reliably than the global counterbalance works against the United States. Given the neighbourhoods they live in, an aspiring Chinese, Japanese, Russian, or German [and in this case Brazilian] pole would face more effective counterbalancing than the United States itself. (Wohlforth, 1999, 31)

The ‘central realist’ debate avoided the domestic variables but tended to coincide with the propositions of RP in its evaluation of structural constraints and incentives. Moreover, it ended by suggesting similar foreign policy strategies as the ones advocated by Escudé much earlier, at the very beginning of the Post-Cold War era. Not surprisingly, case studies that applied the realist theoretical framework to the problem of foreign policy autonomy usually agree that, primarily in security issues, peripheral states “have little choice but to accept the existing international hierarchy if they want to develop or foster their own political and economic systems” (Neuman 2009, 85).

States that command, states that obey and states that rebel

As has happened before with theories that attempt to explain the foreign policies of small states, RP faced the problem of defining what a small state is, since countries may be small in size but very rich, or very big but rather underdeveloped (Handel 1981).

RP has circumvented this problem by classifying states in terms of their peripheral or central status, and by presenting precise operational definitions of peripherality and centrality. This has

been a relatively simple endeavor inasmuch as RP is in itself a reaction to the shortcomings of neorealism, especially as refers to the conception of the interstate system as “anarchic.”

Indeed, as understood by Waltz (1979, 78), anarchy entails that all states are “like units” with similar functions in the interstate system, even if there are enormous power differentials among them. Seen from the perspective of weaker states, it was very obvious from the start that this is not the case at all.

Thus, RP set out to develop a theoretical construct that stresses the differences in functions engendered by power differentials between states. It formulated a conception of the structure of the interstate system that includes three functionally-differentiated types of states: a) Rule-makers (which forge both the written and unwritten rules of world order); b) Rule-takers (which do not have the power to forge these rules, and thus accept them so long as they do not damage their economic interests), and c) Rebel states (which do not have the power to forge rules, but defy them forcibly and go rogue, at a great cost to their citizens).

The “rule-makers,” which are also the principal rule-breakers, are the five permanent members of the Security Council plus an economic great power, Germany. The five permanent members of the Security Council are rule-makers because they have the power to destroy the world. The Non Proliferation Treaty makes them the legal guardians of nuclear weapons. Germany, in turn, is a rule-maker because of its primacy in the Eurozone and the European Central Bank, which makes it the financial master of Europe. These countries do not only have a *de facto* veto power over the decisions of the international community. They also have the power to break their own rules.

Moreover, Germany is the best illustration of the fact that this interstate hierarchy is not crystallized. Indeed, from 1945 to the present day, Germany ascended from an occupied rule-taker whose economy was devastated by war, to the status of virtual ruler of European finances. The secret of its success is that, after World War II, Bonn adopted an RP foreign policy that toed the line of Washington’s demands, so long as West German possibilities of economic recovery and further development were not hindered. It grew incessantly until, after German reunification and the creation of the Eurozone, it became financially paramount in Europe. As is proven by the German case, upward and downward mobility are possible in the hierarchical interstate system.

Japan and South Korea are other spectacular cases in point. They show that the road to success lies not in sterile defiance but in cautious adaptation. On the opposite end are “rebel states”: those that despite lacking rule-making capabilities, refuse to adapt to the order imposed by the rule-makers. Such is the case of states like North Korea, Iraq in the times of Saddam Hussein, Iran until its recent rapprochement with the US, Argentina when it waged the 1982 Falkland Island War, and a few others. The extreme conception of “autonomy” underlying their policies not only leads to failure but also to the sacrifice of citizen welfare.

Finally, in the middle lie the great majority of states, which are essentially “rule-takers.” This category includes both developing countries and advanced industrial ones whose states lack the power to forge rules and to forcibly veto great power attempts at rule-making.

For RP, the operational definition of “peripheral states” includes the sum of rule-takers and rebels (Escudé 1995, 1997, 1998). Of course, these categories need be refined if RP is to be developed further. In particular, they could incorporate the situation of ‘middle powers’ or ‘emerging powers’ (Jordaan 2003), which have been recently noticed to face different incentives and develop particular foreign policy strategies (Pape 2005). Case studies are the obvious method for such theoretical advances. For example, as recently argued by Escudé (2015b), a possible further distinction within the category of the rule-takers is that between: a) Class A rule-takers: highly industrialized countries without world-destroying capabilities, whose economies are fully integrated into the core of the world economy (e.g., most smaller Western European countries, Canada, Australia); b) Class B rule-takers: developing countries that are capable of providing for their own security vis-à-vis other rule-taking peripheral neighbors (e.g., Brazil, Chile, Colombia), and c) Class C rule-takers: peripheral countries that cannot defend themselves vis-à-vis Class B peripheral neighbors, and survive as formally independent because of interstate consensuses to that effect (e.g., Argentina ever since its military collapse following the 1982 Falkland Islands War and the neoliberal dismantling of its arms industry in the 1990s).

Indeed, just as Germany is the foremost example of upward interstate mobility, Argentina is an interesting case of downward mobility. On the other hand, India may be on the threshold of ascending from Class B to a particular rule-maker status – for some, Brazil could also pursue this path. Time will tell.

Other case studies will warrant the coinage of other subcategories. For example, in the context of a study of economic conflicts of interest among European rule-takers, it might be reasonable to assert that Italy is functionally differentiated from Belgium. Indeed, whilst RP postulates three main types of states, several functionally differentiated subtypes can be conceptualized *ad hoc* when useful for understanding relevant phenomena. This flexibility adds to the usefulness of the theory.

Some normative consequences of RP

As with any explanatory theory, RP leads to normative conclusions. Its guidelines coincide with those of the Athenians in the famous Melian dialogue that Thucydides immortalized in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*: “... the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Only at the expense of its citizens can a small country gain greater autonomy *vis-à-vis* a great external power. The Greek historian wrote that the Melians decided to give their life for their autonomy and the Athenians, after winning an easy battle, either killed or enslaved the Melians and repopulated their island. However, most citizen-centered countries are more likely to accept their fortune and accommodate to power distribution in the international realm, preserving their citizen’s well-being and not trying to reach a level of autonomy that their people cannot bear.

Summarizing, the normative conclusion of RP is that weaker states under the ascendancy of a hegemonic power should not attempt costly levels of autonomy at the expense of their citizens. Like the West Germans and the Japanese did under US hegemony since the end of World War II, and like the East Germans did under Soviet hegemony during the Cold War, Escudé concludes that the best strategy would be one that focuses on bandwagoning, preserving citizen well-being and economic growth, rather than gaining foreign policy autonomy at the cost of hampering economic and political development.

In RP, these normative guidelines are explicitly linked to Hans Morgenthau's classical realism (Escudé 1995, 50 and 168; Escudé 1997, 24, 86, 96, 98, 126). Indeed, Morgenthau had passionately stated a norm oft-forgotten by the neorealists that came after him: that the state, because of its responsibility towards its citizens, should not be allowed to follow the premise *'fiat justitia, pereat mundus'* as if it were an individual (Morgenthau 1948, 10).

RP elaborates on this concept, showing that a major fallacy underlying structural realism is to suppose that the state is to the interstate system what the individual is to the state. This anthropomorphic bias of mainstream IR theory, RP claims, inadvertently becomes an authoritarian bias because the "liberty" of the individual vis-à-vis the state is at odds with the state's full "autonomy" vis-à-vis the interstate system: if the state is to have full autonomy it must extract resources from society, to the detriment of citizen welfare and even civil rights. Indeed, RP's deconstruction of the anthropomorphic language of mainstream IR theory antedates constructivist theory by several years (Escudé 1992, 1994, 1995, 1997).

Being a normative theory of its own, RP offers a set of premises that could be taken into consideration to design Latin American foreign policies in the future. One authoritative reader summarizes them as follows:

Escudé's peripheral realism includes the following premises: (1) the concept of national interest should be defined in terms of economic development centered around the well-being of the citizenry; (2) peripheral countries should eliminate political confrontations with core powers in those cases in which the latter's policies do not directly affect the material interest of the country in question; (3) peripheral countries should avoid unproductive confrontations with great powers, even when those confrontations do not generate immediate costs; (4) peripheral countries should avoid 'idealist' but costly foreign policy approaches; and (5) peripheral countries should examine the advantages of bandwagoning with the dominant power or a coalition of great powers. (Tickner 2003, 333)

In the next section, the RP model is confronted with the Latin American experiences during the last twenty-five years of unipolarity.

Latin America under unipolarity: the performance of RP in the recent past

The professional relation that Escudé cultivated with his Argentine colleague from Oxford, Guido Di Tella – then Minister of Foreign Relations (1991-1999) – was well-known, leading some observers to believe that the foreign policies of the Menem Administration were guided by RP theory. Such a conclusion is true only to some extent. It certainly does not apply to the persistence of economic policies that, by the end of the 1990s, jeopardized economic development and citizen well-being – i.e. the national interest itself, in terms of RP theory.

Nevertheless, RP theory could be said to have inspired a political rapprochement with the US to a considerable extent. The Argentine exit from the Non-Aligned Movement, the change from a strongly anti-Western voting profile to a mildly pro-Western one in every IGO (Bertucci 2014), the reestablishment of cooperative relations with the United Kingdom, the deactivation of the Condor II missile project, and the full commitment with the nuclear non proliferation regime, were all recommended by RP and helped to reinsert Argentina in the international community.

Despite RP's indirect influence over foreign policy-making in other Latin American countries, what remains relatively unknown is the extent to which RP was correct in its predictions of international political dynamics under unipolarity in this particular region. The conclusions drawn from RP's explanatory theory of international politics can be put in predictive terms, allowing for theory testing. Indeed, in the early 1990s, RP successfully predicted that the higher the democratic institutionalization in second-tier Latin American countries, the more these countries would prioritize economic development – instead of autonomy – and the more they would tend to bandwagon with the US.

In the long run – i.e. from 1990 to 2015 – Argentina was not the best example of a peripheral realist strategy. RP recommended neither bandwagoning strategies that endangered Argentine economic development – such as Menem's excessive reliance on IMF loans and foreign debt while maintaining recessive monetary policies – nor gratuitous confrontations with the US – such as those in which the Kirchner Administrations were involved several times. Chavez's Venezuela was decisively the worst example, developing a foreign policy that was mostly at odds with any realist interpretation of world politics, and which led to huge costs for its citizens.

On the contrary, the best RP strategies were those enacted by Chile and Colombia, countries that maintained cooperative relations with the US to the extent that it was convenient for their economic development, but maximized their margin of maneuver *vis-à-vis* the hemispheric hegemon by signing FTAs with other partners around the world, keeping a considerable defense expenditure and, more recently, by orienting their foreign policy towards the Pacific.

Colombia has consistently followed the *Respice Polum* – the Latin for “look to the north” – doctrine, enhancing its relation with Washington in every aspect of its international agenda. Comprehensively considering the quality of bilateral relations from investment and trade to foreign aid and voting behavior in IGOs, Colombia is the most reliable American ally below

the Panama Canal. Military cooperation between Washington and Bogotá is so intense that it has repeatedly led to criticism from its South American neighbors.

Chile-U.S. relations are also comparatively intense despite geographic distance. Santiago has signed a free-trade agreement with Washington in 2003, is member of OECD since 2010, and more recently became the only Latin American country whose citizens are exempted from paying a visa to enter the US.

Chile and Colombia followed this strategy consistently. Success followed. From 1990 to 2015, both countries increased their participation in world national capabilities (CINC)², while the Argentine and Venezuelan CINC decreased substantially. GDP growth was also more important in Chile and Colombia in the long run, even if Argentina and Venezuela showed faster economic growth at some points. Moreover, from a citizen-centric rationale, economic growth is not the only factor to be considered, and democratic institutions have also been comparatively stronger in Chile and Colombia than in Venezuela and Argentina.

Summarizing, RP correctly predicted that citizen-centered regimes would be more prone to follow an RP strategy. Chile and Colombia – when compared with Argentina and Venezuela – have displayed more institutionalized domestic politics, evidenced in lower electoral volatility and the absence of presidential crises since the beginning of the unipolar era until our days (Schenoni 2015).

The rise of China: the suggestions of RP for the proximate future

The present international scenario is different from the one at the beginning of the 1990s. Both U.S. hegemony over Latin America and the unipolar global structure are still clear in the military realm, insofar as the US still accounts for half of the world's total military expenditures. But it is less clear whether unipolarity subsists in the economic realm, where China will surpass the US as the highest GDP in the following decade or so.

The debate on the rise of China and the effects it will have on the international system is open. Some think that the power transition will lead Beijing to the hegemonic position that Washington now holds (Tammen and Kugler 2006), while others think of it in terms of power diffusion – rather than transition – and a trend towards a bi- or multi-polar stable structure (Schweller and Pu 2011). Among the former, some think that the transition will take place peacefully (Buzan and Cox 2013) while others predict an inevitable conflict (Mearsheimer 2010).

In any case, these changes are already impacting Latin America (Roett and Paz 2008), to the point that China is presently the most important importer of Brazil and Chile, as well as Argentina's second customer, preceded only by Brazil (CIA World Factbook 2015).

2 The CINC is based on six indicators of international power, which are considered relevant for a neorealist definition of the concept: energy consumption, iron and steel production, military expenditure, military personnel, total population and urban population (Singer et al. 1972).

On the other hand, because RP has distinct strategic implications for peripheral states under unipolarity, it must also develop normative guidelines for the times ahead.

First, an RP strategy requires an agreement on a definition of citizen well-being. Such a consensus is not easy to attain in any society, but it seems that public opinion in most Latin American countries would agree that foreign policy should be put at the service of development (Merke and Pauselli 2013). It seems fairly accepted in the region that citizen well-being requires sustainable economic growth and wealth redistribution, together with the protection of current levels of democracy and of each country's sovereignty. In the past, nationalist discourse has reverted this order of primacy, overestimating sovereignty to the detriment of development and democracy. As values and norms have changed, any definition of citizen well-being nowadays will certainly require the revision of this order (cf. Hurrell 2007).

Second, RP departs from the realistic acknowledgment of the subordinated status of Latin American countries in the international system and has an equally realistic interpretation of their perspectives for the immediate future. Despite nationalist discourse, the best foreign policy does not, in and of itself, generate GDP growth nor reductions of inequality, although an excessively confrontational foreign policy can set off sanctions that severely damage the economy and citizen welfare. In their fragile situation, weaker states are constantly at risk of losing very modest conquests, such as basic democratic institutions and minimum autonomy. Moderation and prudence are therefore necessary virtues for any statesman trying to navigate the troubled waters of power transition between China and the US. A radical tack with any of these partners could damage growth, democracy or even sovereignty. However, in the long run, any sailor must have a destination, and the boat must always be heading to the port that promises the greater gains. In South America in particular, Beijing has created great economic incentives for these countries to expand their horizons towards Asia, and so it must be as long as it does not affect other interests such as democracy.

However, the US may eventually start to impose high costs for countries that engage with China in certain ways. Thus, an optimal strategy must consider not only the orientation of particular foreign policies toward Washington or Beijing, but also the nuances that will make such a strategy viable in the long term.

For the time being, however, things seem under control in the US-China relationship as refers to Latin America, because for various reasons China needs the US at least as much as Argentina, Brazil and Chile need China. Indeed, many US officials understand that the People's Republic of China does not pose a real security threat in the region, and this is probably the reason why former US Assistant Secretary of State Arturo Valenzuela resumed the US-China Strategic Dialogue on Latin America, which was initiated by his predecessor, Thomas Shannon. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Frank Mora has even observed that Chinese arms sales can contribute to security in the Hemisphere (Ellis 2011).

Needless to say, this State Department acquiescence may be simple posturing. And even if it is serious, it could change when least expected. Hence, in face of the present shift in the US-Sino economic equilibrium, prudence is clearly the byword for Latin American countries.

Conclusion

RP has arguably been the most important theoretical contribution of Latin American academia to IR Theory in the last three decades. In the past, many scholars have acknowledged this and even made use of its concepts and guidelines to interpret the reality of weak states inside and outside this particular region. Very few works, however, tried to summarize the strengths and weaknesses of RP as a research program.

This article started by showing the way in which RP preceded all major realist critiques and revisions of the definitions of state, national interest and anarchy that were typical of neorealism at the beginnings of the 1990s. It argued that RP anteceded in many aspects the critical viewpoint of Neoclassical Realists, Postclassical Realists and Offensive Realists. It also claimed that RP anteceded constructivism in the deconstruction of IR's anthropomorphic language. Moreover, it showed that, in rather indirect but insightful ways, RP pioneered the literature on the extractive capacity of the state and on democratic peace theory.

The main drive of RP theorizing has been to interpret the incentives faced by relatively weak countries such as Argentina in their relations with the regional hegemon, the US, in a unipolar context. This, in turn, was based on previous empirical historiographical research carried out during the late 1970s and early 1980s, which focused on the enormous costs of Argentina's neutrality during World War II, as well as on the moderate benefits, for Brazil, of its wartime alliance with the US.

To evaluate the heuristic value of RP foreign policy strategy, this article compared it to the strategies developed by other realist authors by the end of the 1990s, showing that mainstream analyses were consistent with RP's conclusions: that these countries' incentives were primarily to bandwagon with the US.

Latin American foreign policies under unipolarity were then analyzed through RP lenses. As the theory predicted, countries that had more stable and institutionalized democracies – i.e. citizen-centered regimes – were precisely those that more consistently bandwagoned with the US.

Alongside the significant record that RP has to show in theoretical and empirical terms, a section was devoted here to the many challenges that RP has faced, and to the numerous theoretical and normative problems that still await solution. Finally, the last section went on to analyze the policy recommendations and predictions of RP in a new international context characterized by the rise of China.

In conclusion, RP remains a powerful theoretical tool for interpreting the foreign policy of weaker states. Its peripheral stance not only allowed RP to pioneer the realist debate but

also made it possible to prognosticate the evolution of Latin American foreign policies during the last decades. As a research program, RP has also demonstrated long-lasting influence and the particular resilience that characterize useful and successful theories.

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